



From Dust Bowl to COVID: One Choir's 5,000-Week Witness

By Abram Maitar

CHURCH HISTORY

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How did a church choir outlast war, grief, and cultural change? Through sacred mission, technical devotion, and relentless service.

The pulsating melody of Mack Wilburg's "[O Light of Life!](#)" ran before the sight of the choir. I inwardly exclaimed my excitement as memories of the first time I heard the song flooded back into my mind. A lonely, 19-year-old missionary lays on the floor of his flat, attempting to cool down. His first week in a new area, he listens to a new CD after a hot day of service doing yard work under the Australian summer sun. He needs to shower and change from his sweaty, muddied work clothes into a white shirt and tie. He only has a couple of moments before he must hurry to be on time for a dinner and lesson hosted by a local church-member family and one of their friends who is interested in their church. All the while, he tries to catch his breath and find a peaceful moment ...

This upcoming July 13th will mark the 5,000th episode of *Music & the Spoken Word*. This weekly live broadcast of inspiring messages, imagery, and music presented by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints features musical performances by The Tabernacle Choir, Orchestra, Bells, and Organists at Temple Square. Such a milestone represents nine decades of weekly broadcasts, making it the world's longest continuing network broadcast in history. To prepare for the upcoming celebration, Public Square, along with other advocate organizations for the Church, were invited to meet some of the *Music & The Spoken Word* production team, watch the Choir rehearse, and tour their facilities and performance venues.

I hope to 'take you along with us' and share in our experience of what was a beautiful and warmly hosted evening for learning more about the history and mission of the Choir. We share with you their invitation to join this special 5,000th broadcast on July 13th at 9:00 AM (MT), either for free [in-person](#) (no reservation or tickets required, as always) or by livestream via the Choir's [YouTube channel](#).

The evening began with guests gathering together in the Salt Lake City Conference Center's indoor plaza. The grand space with vast stone floors, polished wood walls, and larger-than-life murals depicting New Testament and Book of Mormon scenes was lit by the warm glow of the setting sun, glinting through high windows crowned by frosted glass beehive motifs. Pearly white, the marble Christus statue gleamed from the second-story balcony. Other groups began to filter in. Mostly, it seemed like local YSA and youth groups, along with tourists and the occasional local regular, all chatting joyfully and dressed in arrays of casual attire, waiting for the auditorium doors to permit them into the Choir's weekly rehearsal. Initially confused by the large gathering, I learned from a young, smiling sister missionary that the Choir opens their rehearsals to the public for free every Thursday evening (rehearsal attendance [details here](#)). While the gathering crowd went into the Conference Center Auditorium, our group was guided outside.

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We walked South along raised flower beds full of fragrant and gorgeous early summer blossoms on our path toward the iconic Tabernacle at Temple Square. Myself born and raised in Utah though recently home from living abroad in Europe, the structure of the Salt Lake City Temple—with its undeniable European influence ([SAH Archipedia](#))—peeking out from under its renovation scaffolding granted me a sense of gratitude and amazement at the accomplishment of those European pioneers who made that same trek. What took me 28 hours of plane ride for a year-and-a-half of studies, took them just about the same amount of time to travel one way as my whole experience abroad ([The Convert Immigrants](#)). Passing between huge, dark wood doors, we entered the large, domed oval tabernacle. Frank Lloyd Wright, famed American architect, called this building “one of the architectural masterpieces of the country and perhaps the world” ([Henrichsen and Dixon](#)). Similar praise for the innovative design of the hall earned its place as a National Historic Landmark in 1970 and the first National Civil Engineering Landmark in 1971 ([SAH Archipedia](#)).

The ovular, white-domed roof sits atop rows of dark wood pews with a second-story balcony all facing toward the rostrum, choir stalls, and large pipe organ. The silhouette of this organ’s facade is immediately recognizable to Latter-day Saint worshippers as the icon on all our sacred music and has served for years as the logo for the Tabernacle Choir. The vast majority of the building’s structure is original, and the decor is lovingly preserved. Upon closer inspection, one may notice that the dark wood, at first appearing as dark oak, is in reality hand-painted pine. Pine, the available Utah native wood, was hand-painted darker to look like the color and grain of oak—a reminder of the native wood in the Eastern United States, home for most of these now settled immigrants.

The uninterrupted and unsupported dome roof was unique in its time, made possible by Henry Grow implementing the latest in lattice work from his experience engineering bridges. As opposed to the musical tradition up to that time, the building intentionally diffuses sound instead of echoing like a cathedral or concert hall. This technology allows for a more intricate musical vernacular, versus more monastic melodies. Recordings of the Tabernacle Choir seek to replicate the warm, intimate, and full-bodied sound of the Choir and organ in this space.

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In the art of placemaking, there is the ever-desirable goal of creating a space that is uniquely itself. When in the Tabernacle on Temple Square, there is a tangible sense of experiencing an entirely individual expression of the Latter-day Saint pioneer culture during the mid-late 1800s. The building has an almost minimalist focus: a place for gathering, hearing, speaking, and music-making. Unique among instruments, an organ is an instrument that is fully integrated into the architecture of the building. Like the relationship between the strings on a guitar and the belly of the guitar acting as a resonator, the pipes of an organ resonate within the cavern of the building. The Tabernacle is more than a building; it is a massive musical instrument.

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Our guide pointed out an open access hatch into the complex interior of the organ casework. Joseph Ridges' instrument of 11,623 pipes, 206 ranks, 147 stops, and mechanical air pumps extending all the way to the back of the hall requires daily maintenance and tuning by 1 or 2 organ techs with PhDs. There I saw a hand-written sign saying, "Please Do Not Turn on The Organ--We are working inside!" I chuckled, wondering what experience necessitated the sign. In addition to the Choir's weekly rehearsal, the 5 Organists of Temple Square present a "century-old tradition" of daily open-to-the-public organ recitals (recital attendance [details here](#)).



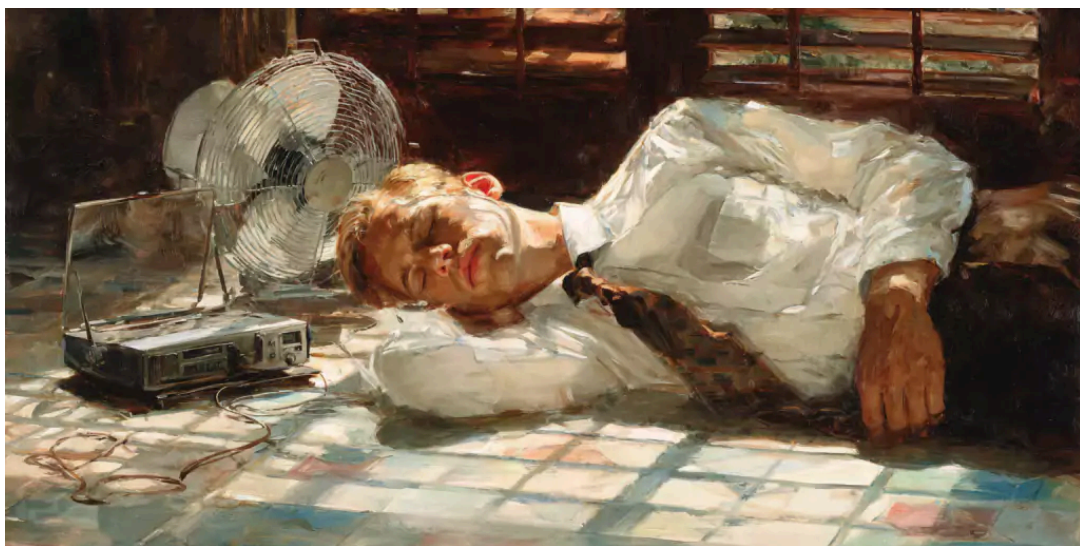
Growing up, I had often heard urban legends about the network of tunnels beneath the five blocks of Temple Square, but this was the first time I finally got to walk through them. The network was clean but winding, with the combined facilities for servicing the logistics of the Tabernacle Choir, Bells, Organists, and Orchestra all underneath the Tabernacle building, accessible through a south-facing entrance with a tunnel leading under the street over to the Conference Center.

Of these subterranean facilities, our group saw:

- The Women's wardrobe and changing space with 5 dresses and jewelry for each sister in the choir.
- A completely wood recording studio large enough to fit large musical ensembles and doubling for Chorale rehearsals (the 9-month vetting process of new choir members led by Ryan Murphy, complete with a written exam).
- The audio control studio, which services not only the Choir and *Music & the Spoken Word* but any major broadcast or recording for the Church, includes a wall-to-wall screen showing the Choir, and a massive mixing board of 128 analog channels. We silently walked into the space just in time to watch the designer, whose job it is to achieve the iconic warm, clear, and deep ("full-bodied") tone of the Choir near the end of a rendition of "[You'll Never Walk Alone](#)". In live-time, the sound for every live broadcast is recorded digitally in the Conference Hall, then immediately sent across the street via fiber-optic cable to this studio, where it is converted and mixed in analog, then converted back into digital and sent back across the street to the Conference Center from where it is broadcast. When asked why they go through such a rigamarole, he replied, "It just sounds better."
- Where once there was a baptismal font and religious gathering space, now the full-time staff offices—including Mack Wilburg's—reside.
- The music library of over a million copies of music, supplying each choir, orchestra, organist, and bell musician with their own music in their own locker.
- Behind the library—"The Horse Shoe"—a large rehearsal space with two of the three practice organs and a giant lift for moving large instruments and set pieces from underground onto the stage.
- The 'backstage area' immediately behind the rostrum and organ, originally designed for presiding authorities to meet, now additionally serves as lovely green rooms for presenters and guest artists.

These spaces facilitate the movement of the 400 volunteer choir members (with 360 singing at any one time), 200 orchestra volunteer members (of which 85 perform at a time), 32 musicians in the Bells ensemble, five organists, over 50 backstage technicians, a 20 person full time staff, and over 100 logistics volunteers all coordinated underneath the sloping, raked seats of the Tabernacle.

After our tour of the Tabernacle, we retraced our steps back toward the conference hall. By this time, the sun had completely set, and a warm glow emanated from the interior of the Conference Center Auditorium. Before our eyes could explore the details of the massive auditorium, waves of music greeted us.



It was at this point that the memories from my mission passed before my mind's eye, prompted by the same song, "[O Light of Life!](#)" Both on that day (over a decade ago) as a lonely missionary in Australia and today, visiting Temple Square as I walked into the auditorium, I saw the same smiling face. Michelle Pollard and her family became dear friends nearly immediately. That night at dinner, as soon as they learned I could keep a pitch, I was immediately propped against a piano for an impromptu concert of *Les Misérables*. With members of the family taking their turns, including a grand finale from Michelle singing *Phantom of the Opera*. At the time, Michelle led the local Moe Ward choir (which I was commanded to participate in), earning acclaim from the then mission President Cory Maxwell and his wife Karen Bradshaw Maxwell—a former Tabernacle Choir member herself—who punningly dubbed the group of vocalists "The Moe Tabernacle Choir." At dinner, conversation turned to favorite hymns and primary songs, and particular favorite recordings of the then "Mormon Tabernacle Choir." Afterward, I remember Michelle sighing, then telling me, "I don't know how, but someday I will sing

in that choir.” I nodded because she was obviously talented, yet shrugged, admittedly doubting; 8.5 thousand miles, half the globe seemed to stand between her and such a dream.

The echoes of my reverie were promptly disrupted as Mack Wilburg, the choir’s director, halted the music to correct the “getting too wide” vowel shape of “life”—it is a rehearsal after all. And though I couldn’t hear what joke was made, the choir made a soft chuckle and resumed their music again. Looking across the hall, I could see Michelle’s smiling face, now a member of the Choir, having moved at great sacrifice of her and her family from her home nation of Australia ([Raising Family Podcast, S1E20](#)). Clearly, God had blessed her with a vision and made a dream come true. So it is for every member of that choir.

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With that memory in mind, I was reminded of something Choir President Mike Leavitt said earlier that evening to our group. He mentioned, “Every human being needs quiet moments of reflection,” and The Choir produces music for people in such moments “to draw closer to the divine and feel God’s love for His children” ([Our Mission](#)). The initially lonely but blessed night on my mission was no exception. Executive Producer and Announcer Derrick Porter shared what he’s learned during their recent initiative to hear listeners’ memories with the *Music & the Spoken Word* program. The program has delivered weekly uninterrupted broadcasts through the Great Depression, World War II, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the assassination of President Kennedy, 9/11, and the COVID-19 pandemic ([Rappleye, Church News](#)). Its broadcast has been heard in 50 countries, the depths of the ocean in submarines, the frozen expanse of Antarctica, and the summits of Fuji and even Everest. The reach of the program has an incredible heritage.

Whatever the circumstances of your life, may you find a moment of quiet contemplation. Enjoy your opportunity to share in *Music & the Spoken Word*’s 5,000th episode legacy this July 13th at 9:00 AM (MT) either [in-person](#) or by livestream via the Choir’s [YouTube channel](#). I pass along their warm welcome to [visit Temple Square](#) for free to see its beautiful grounds, buildings, and venue tours, [organ recitals](#), [choir](#)

[rehearsals](#), [events](#), and future [broadcasts](#). And “until we meet again, may peace be with you this day and always” (*Music & the Spoken Word* [salutation](#)).

About the author

Abram Maitar

Abram is a recent masters graduate and PhD student working as an editor and staff member for Public Square Magazine.